# Regional Highlights

## *South Atlantic Region*

The three-year field study to investigate deep-sea coral ecosystems in the southeast, as previously described on page page 7, serves the needs of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, which has authority over fisheries in federal waters from North Carolina to Key West.

The Council and NOAA have been proactive in protecting deep-sea coral reefs by establishing five deepwater Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (C-HAPCs) totaling 24,215 square miles in 2010, where fishing gears that contact the seafloor are prohibited and coral habitat is protected. Within the C-HAPCs, there are areas where small-scale traditional fisheries that use bottom-contact gear to catch golden crab and royal red shrimp are allowed. As the Council continues to find ways to best conserve coral habitats while preserving fishing interests, it is looking to the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program and other NOAA programs and offices to determine the precise locations and ecological importance of the coral habitats so the boundaries of the C-HAPCs and allowable fishing areas can be refined.

To align the program's three-year study with the Council's needs, the program not only involved the Council representatives in the initial design of the study but also partnered with members of the Council's Coral Advisory Panel in five of the program's seven research cruises. Furthermore, as the study entered the final analysis phase in late 2011, NOAA presented the preliminary findings to the advisory panel to keep the Council informed (Figure 2). Final results are scheduled to be released in a report in late 2012.

In recognition of the value of the preliminary findings provided by the program, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council chairman thanked NOAA for its research in the region over the last three years, referring to the preliminary results as "instrumental in providing data and documentation on the distribution and ecological significance of these resources." In a letter to NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, the chairman summarized the areas where the new findings can help with the Council's adaptive management to protect deep-sea coral communities. As much of the South Atlantic region has yet to be explored to determine the true extent of deep-sea coral ecosystems, the chairman recognized the large suite of remaining science needs and called for continued research.

## *Gulf of Mexico Region*

In the southeast region, the program also works in the Gulf of Mexico. The program compiled spatial records of structure-forming deep-sea coral locations in the Gulf, and has increased the compilation from less than 100 records to over 1,800. The program provided maps of these deep-sea coral locations to help guide efforts for the response and Natural Resource Damage Assessment following the Deepwater Horizon MC252 oil spill. Building on this knowledge of deep-sea coral locations, in 2011 the program initiated a study to use computer models to predict additional habitat areas in the Gulf of Mexico that may be suitable for deep-sea corals.